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Remarks
On the Pathology
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Anasarca.
by
William S. Helmuth.

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By the term Dropsy is meant an accumulation of Serous fluid in one or more of the cavities of the body. - Different names have been given, according to the situation, in which this fluid may be lodged; thus when it is confined to the Abdomen, it is called Ascites; when to the Thorax, Hydrothorax; when to the cellular tissue, Anasarca; when to the eye, Hydropthalmy; and so on of the other varieties, they also taking their names from two Greek words, one of which signifies water, and the other the name of the part into which the water is effused;

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or else from supposed resemblances of the swellings to certain objects.

It is a disease of an hereditary nature and the predisposition to it, is found in the Phlegmatic Temperament: The knowledge of its hereditary character was known to the antients, as many of the older writers speak of the fact, and Hippocrates says, that persons predisposed to Dropsy, have blue eyes and are bald.

This affection may be induced by various causes; by a feebleness of constitution brought on by a poor diet; exposure to a damp atmosphere; depressing passions; the inveterate use of ardent drinks, this habit alone has been thought sufficient by some Physicians to occasion a true Dropsy; by impure air; long continued evacuations, frequent salivations; great losses of blood;

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Scarlatina; the abuse of Mercury, drinking when heated cold liquors; cold externally applied to the body while warm; rupture of the Lymphatics; interruptions to the free passage of the blood, either from Tumours, Abscesses & Aneurisms of the Arteries, Schirrus of the Liver, Pancreas and other glands; inflammed limbs; unsoundness of the Digestive organs; it also follows an attack of Intermittent Fever, and Broussais has inserted among his propositions of Medicine that "Dropsy sometimes occurs at the first attack of Intermittent Fevers but ordinarily is the result of their long continuance only": And in a word Dr Macbride says "every thing therefore which can weaken the absorbent power of the Lymphatics or which occasions a preternatural secretion or oozing of lymph may be considered as a remote or possible cause of

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Of the Proximate Cause.

This appears to be involved in much obscurity. When the system is in a healthy condition an equilibrium is maintained by the exhalent and absorbent systems of vessels; but disease may destroy this balance and the result will necessarily be, a accumulations of fluid in those parts where such inequality prevails. It has been a question much agitated among Medical men, whether Dropsy was to be attributed to an increased secretion from the exhalents, or whether the powers of the absorbents were lessened, or whether both these circumstances conjoined produced the disease. Sydenham says that the two sources of Dropsy "are an increased effusion or diminished absorption of fluids, which may with propriety be reduced to

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the last, for whether there be a defect in the imbibing powers of the absorbent system, or too great an effusion from the exhaling vessels, the want of action in the former, adequate to take up what is effused constitutes the cause - An impoverished condition of the blood has been thought to give a tendency to aqueous effusions; and Cullen asserts that this condition may be produced by the taking in of large quantities of water, and may also be attributed to a languid circulation being carried on by the skin, thereby converting it, from a perspiring to an imbibing state. This Hypothesis however of Cullen's is incorrect, the weakened condition is not owing, as he imagined, to the drinking of much water, but is a consequence of the powers of digestion and assimilation being impaired, and consequently

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incapable of affording the proper proportions of red globules and coagulating lymph. Cullen also supposed that there may be a laxity of the exhalent vessels; which opinion he thinks derives strength from the fact of Paralytic Limbs, in which such a laxity is considered to exist, being frequently affected with Oedematous swellings; and also from the additional fact that Dropsy is met with in cases of general debility in which such a laxity of the exhalents exists. He also thinks that a principal cause of the effusion is a decreased absorption for he remarks "It seems probable that absorption may be diminished and cease altogether, from a loss of tone in the absorbent extremities of the Lymphatics, I cannot indeed doubt, that a certain degree of tone or active power is necessary in these absorbent extremities, and

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it appears probable, that the same general debility which produces that laxity of the exhalent vessels, wherein I have supposed the Hydropic diathesis to consist, will at the same time occasion a loss of tone in the absorbents, and therefore that a laxity of the exhalents will generally be accompanied by a loss of tone in the absorbents, and that this will have a share in the production of Dropsy; indeed it is probable that the diminution of absorption has a considerable share in the matter of Dropsies, as Dropsies are often cured by Medicines which seem to operate by exciting the action of the absorbents".

The fact of the Lymphatics in dropsical bodies, being found much enlarged and thickened might also be considered as additional testimony to the supposition of

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diminished absorption. Absorption may also be lessened in consequence of the exhalents secreting a vitiated fluid and therefore obnoxious to the Lymphatics. Dr. Maclean says "that the functions of the absorbent system of vessels are variously affected in different cases of Dropsy seems very probable, since they are restored and the disease is cured by Medicines possessing apparently different and opposite effects". A paralysis of the absorbents has also been assigned as a cause; but if this were correct, relief would not be as suddenly and frequently afforded as it is; if such a cause does exist it is most probably in those cases, which are found to be beyond the reach of Medicine. Dropsy has been imagined by some to arise in consequence of an inability of the Kidnies, but this is at once contradicted by a knowledge of the fact, that persons

* It is mentioned by Dr Good in his Study of Medicine, that Dr Gooch gives an account of a case of Dropsy in which the Liver attained the enormous weight of six hundred and twenty eight pounds; and that Baldinger reports another instance in which it reached to six hundred and twenty pounds; and Bonnet a case in which its weight amounted to six hundred and eighteen pounds—

often die from incapacity to make water without becoming dropsical.

The state of the biliary secretion is thought to have a considerable share in the production of Dropsies, and that an enlargement of the Liver, which was alone considered to excite the disease, is a least frequent cause;* but that the complaint is to be charged to a disordered state of the Viscus, and as this appears to me to be be a consideration of much importance, I must beg leave to make an extract from the valuable work of Dr Maclean, who appears to have justly appreciated the connexion between Dropsy and disorders of the Liver; he goes on to say "When the function of the Liver is so far impaired by whatever cause, that undue quantities of bile are conveyed to the blood, the urinary secretion and lymphatic absorption, appear

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always to be more or less diminished, and there is a corresponding tendency to dropsy; insomuch that if there be a general predisposition to the disease it will frequently take place long before any schirrous induration, or other enlargement, sufficient in size or degree to impede the return of the venous blood, shall have yet occurred. Though healthy bile be an active stimulus to the bowels, yet when diverted from its natural channel and mixed with the blood it proves the reverse to other organs."

"In jaundice a general torpor and languor pervade the bodily and mental faculties; and if in consequence of previous morbid action of the Liver the bile should be vitiated in its properties, these effects will be still more remarkable. Hence any material derangement of this organ, especially if accompanied with a languid action of its vessels,

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and absorption of bile, and be produced by the common causes of Dropsy, will be succeeded by a corresponding inactivity of the Kidnies and absorbent vessels; and if these causes be not removed, and a proper plan of Medicine and Regimen submitted to, either chronic inflammation, scirrus enlargement of the Liver, or both, will be the consequence" —

The opinions of the Medical World in more recent times have undergone an entire change with regard to the nature of this affection and instead of considering it as it was formerly supposed to be, a disease of debility, most Physicians are now convinced that it is often of an inflammatory description, and some even go so far as to maintain it to be always of the latter character; the mean between these two extremes will be found to approach nearest the truth,

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for the most correct view of the subject is certainly to consider the disease, sometimes as one of low at other times one of high action. The proofs of its inflammatory nature are drawn from the following circumstances; first, that the exhalation would in most cases appear to be increased; secondly, that the blood when drawn exhibits the marks of inflammation; thirdly, that the remedies employed in the treatment of the disease are such as are used to subdue inflammation; and fourthly, dissections exhibit the most positive evidence of its existence, for the membranes are found much inflammed; opaque and discoloured serum and even peices of lymph are met with in the affected cavities; the membranes partially suppurated; the liver frequently in a schirrous state, or of a texture more unyielding than natural. The cellular

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membrane uncommonly firm and containing an effusion almost transparent and in a coagulated form. The Kidnies in a majority of cases are found to be unaffected, when diseased they are rather hard and no well marked distinction can be perceived between their Medullary and cortical parts.

I shall now proceed to make some observations on the Urine as found in Dropsical cases: But will first take a cursory notice of the opinion entertained by some Physiologists of a connexion between the Stomach and Bladder independent of the route of the circulation; The circumstance leading to such a supposition was the rapidity with which some articles after having been taken into the Stomach reach the Urinary organs. Richerand in his Physiology in relation to this subject

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remarks" The rapidity with which we void, with the Urine, certain diuretics, has induced several Physiologists to think, that there exists a direct communication between the Stomach and Bladder; no one however, has ever succeeded in pointing out those peculiar ducts, which might serve to convey the urine from the Stomach to the Urinary organs, without taking the circuitous course of absorption and of the circulation; and besides the learned Haller has proved by accurate calculations; that the size of the Renal Arteries, whose caliber amounts to an eighth of that of the Aorta, and the quickness with which the blood flows, sufficed to account for the shortness of the time, in which certain fluids reach the Urinary Organs" - The above explanation although plausible enough, must not however be considered

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as deciding the question for some eminent Physiologists still maintain the idea of an immediate connexion. Sir Everard Home has published two papers in the Philosophical Transactions of Great Britain, upon this subject, in the first of which he was led to suppose, from the results of some experiments made by himself, that this communication was between the Cardiac portion of the Stomach and the Spleen; but in his second essay he shows the fallacy of this opinion by giving an account of some other experiments in which although the spleen was extirpated, some substances were detected in the Urine, in as short a time after having been received into the Stomach as when the Spleen was untouched.
The question therefore still remains undetermined, and I think it would be most

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I shall now say something of the Urine itself. By a late writer of much judgement and correctness (Dr Blackall) the Urine has been found to afford a means of ascertaining with more certainty than heretofore the real nature of Dropsical effusions. The different appearances which this secretion assumes have long been noticed, such as its colour, quantity, consistency &c; but its property of coagulating when exposed to heat is of modern date (the discovery of Dr Blackall) and a knowledge of the circumstance was obtained by a fortunate chance. By attending to this property our indications of cure will be much more clear and certain; which being the case I conceive that

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some few remarks on the state of this secretion generally, and more particularly relative to this new property, will be neither useless nor ill timed. The Urine is found in this disease to vary very materially, sometimes tinged with blood, sometimes depositing peices of lymph and a sediment extremely offensive and at other times one which is branny and lateritious or resembling chalk, then again it is watery and crude soon becoming putrid. The following distinction has been made by Dr Cruickshank, that in general dropsy the Urine coagulates like diluted serum of the blood, but in Dropsies proceeding from unsound viscera it is high coloured and scanty and deposits when cool a pink coloured sediment. The quantity of coagulable matter found in the Urine is very different and the

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temperature required to form this coagulum also varies, 160° will sometimes be sufficient, at other times it becomes necessary to raise it to 212°; the coagula when obtained differ, being at one time small and ragged, at another hard and solid. The Nitrous Acid produces the same results and may be used when the heat of heat is insufficient. The coagulum is ascertained to be Serum; it has been found in other cases besides Dropsical ones, as was verified in two cases recorded by Dr. Blackall one of which was in an instance of great emaciation, the other was a case of Epistaxis. Dr. Blackall supposes that the alkalies and Magnesia dispose the Serous part of the blood to be eliminated by the route of the Kidneys: He has also detected Serum in the Urine of persons labouring under the Hectic from Mercury, and he suggests that this may be

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a criterion in determining the use of that Mineral. The conclusions which he draws from his observations and experiments are, that in cases of high action the urine coagulates by employing the means already mentioned; that in cases of a contrary character the urine is pale and not coagulable; and that when it is high coloured, small in quantity and deposits a pink coloured sediment, disease of the viscera is indicated. This quality however of the Urine considered independently of the other Symptoms attendant on the disease would never be a sufficient guide in the treatment, which to be successful must embrace all the other circumstances of the complaint, such as the derangement of the viscera, etc. Its presence however he considers either as a proof of Dropsy forming or already formed, and Dr. Wells in

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papers which he published relative to this matter declares, that after repeated observation he has satisfied himself that it occurs but very rarely in any disease excepting Dropsy, and that when it appears unconnected with that affection, it has been induced by Mercury.

— Symptoms. —

The manner in which a Dropsy most usually appears, is first by a soft and inelastic swelling of the ancles, which before the person rises in the morning has subsided, but when he places himself in the erect position again appears; this tumefaction next extends up the legs and thus taking its course until the whole body becomes swollen. The swelling when prefsed yields under the force applied but when the prefsure is removed returns to its original bulk; when the disease becomes considerably extended, the cellular membrane of the

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Lungs is involved in the complaint, a cough and difficulty of breathing then ensue. The appearance of the Urine varies; the bowels become costive; thirst very great; emaciation and slow fever succeed. The symptoms just enumerated are those which belong to Anasarca it will be however proper to add that the disease sometimes comes on very rapidly, which is the case, particularly when it follows an attack of Scarlatina —

— Prognosis —

If the Dropsy succeeds Scarlatina and the Urine is turbid resembling very much water in which flesh has been washed, and is of an offensive odour, depositing when cool a bloody sediment, all these circumstances denote an aggravated Hydropic diathesis, and demand much promptitude and judgement on the part of the Physician — If the disease partakes of an Inflammatory nature

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the quantity of coagulum in the Urine will designate the grade of Inflammation, and if the heat required to form the coagulum be very great and when it is formed, if it be loose in its texture we may infer but little inflammation to exist: In some cases however Serum was found in which the administration of Peruvian Bark was necessary. The Urine changing to a dilute state may be considered as a favorable sign; this however always occurs after Scarifications and Tapping, in both which cases the alteration continues but a short time. Hippocrates in his Prognostics of Diseases asserts that Dropsies arising from acute diseases are always dangerous. If the disease has been brought on by excesses and made its appearance gradually, so much the more difficulty may be anticipated in affording relief; and if formed slowly

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from the abuse of Mercury, much danger may be apprehended. If there is thirst, much fever, difficult respiration, a rotten taste in the mouth, costive bowels, palpitations, a short cough, swellings of the ancles, conjunctiva of a pearly colour, a sallow skin, frequent making of water, which is crude and deposits a bloody sediment, a Cachectic state is indicated and effusions will follow most probably of an extremely unmanagable kind. The expectoration of bilious and rotten Sputa and a bad smelling breath has been thought to indicate a schirrus of the Liver. A sign of bad import is, when the swelling suddenly subsides and the Urine at the same time increased in quantity but without any change being produced in its character. If there are no evidences of biscerial derangement and the strength still remains we may draw

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Of the Treatment.

I shall next give the outline of the plan to be pursued in the treatment of this disease, and it appears to me that in its management considerable difficulty and indecision are generally experienced and that remedies are given in a manner approaching very near to Empiricism; in short from what I have myself seen of the disease I have sometimes been almost induced to assent to the opinion of the antients, that it is one of those diseases which defy the powers of Medical Science.

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and secondly to bring the parts in such a state as to prevent farther effusion; The remedies employed for the accomplishment of these intentions, consist of Diuretics, Purgatives, more particularly those denominated Hydrogogue, Emetics, Sialagogues, Tonics, and those other means which the system constantly varying as it does in disease may require: thus if the pulse was tense and quick, if the Urine coagulated by heat we should infer a Phlogistic condition and employ venesection and such other means as were calculated to subdue action: If on the contrary the pulse was weak, the Urine not coagulable, much emaciation and debility, we should percieve the necessity of Tonics and such a method of treatment, ~~which~~ as would restore the strength.

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With respect to Diuretics Boerhave says "I know of no remedy in Physic but what becomes such by due application, Bloodletting may in one case produce diurens and Brandy in another". Dr. Blackall relates a case of diurens being brought on by the eating of well fermented bread. Diuretics are most serviceable in a scanty and loaded Urine, and least so when it is large in quantity and of a pale colour, in which latter case Alkalies and Bitters are best: If there is a constant discharge of water and the disease is not relieved thereby, the use of Diuretics is forbidden, particularly Digitalis. If the complexion is sallow it may be proper to combine a bitter with the Diuretic: If there is Gastric distress, by combining a bitter with the diuretic the action of the latter will be

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increased and the uneasiness of the Stomach at the same time removed. Stimulating Diuretics Dr Blackall thinks have in some instances produced the Diabetes insipidus. Diuretics will often produce no effect unless a Cathartic be previously administered; and as they are often uncertain in their operation and are apt to occasion a Diaphoresis and other contrary effects, the most effectual way of inducing their proper action is to combine several of them in the same formula. Camphor is said to correct the effects of powerful diuretics. Dr Paris in his most excellent work entitled Pharmacologia has suggested some new views respecting the Modus Operandi of Diuretics, although the doctrine is of a character different from that, which we have been

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taught to believe, yet the practice to be derived from it is certainly highly useful and valuable. The matter to which reference is now made will be found in the work last mentioned under the account of the Acetas Potassæ; Dr Paris there says that from the very particular attention which he has paid to the subject during the exercise of his profession, he is satisfied that the organs of Digestion are endued with the power of decomposing all Salts in which vegetable acids are contained and of eliminating their alkaline base, which base is carried by the circulation to the Kidnies and there provokes the discharge of Urine, and that this is the manner in which those saline compounds act as diuretics; if however the dose is so large as to purge then no effect is

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produced on the Urinary secretion, for during an Alvine excitement absorption and assimilation are but imperfectly performed: But that on the contrary Salts into which the Mineral Acids enter, do not undergo this decomposition by the digestive apparatus, although some of the more soluble of them are absorbed and stimulate the Kidnies to increased action, such for instance is the Nitrate of Potash. He then says that from these circumstances we might infer that by associating Diuretics with such Medicines as would invigorate digestion we should be more likely to insure their successful operation, and this is actually proved to be the truth, for by the addition of bitters the effects of Diuretics are much more certain. These Ideas as leading

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to a more correct and scientific practice appear to me worthy of much attention.

In the administration of Diuretics some cautions are to be observed. We must be particular in the choice of our Article in order that it may be well suited to the case. The patient if possible must remain out of his bed and the temperature of the Apartment must be kept low with a view of preventing diaphoresis. The Pulse must be kept below the natural standard, but during the action of a diuretic we must avoid depletion. When the Medicine has operated in the manner desired let diluent drinks be freely administered.

The Diuretics most frequently used are the Supertartras and Carbonas Potassæ, the Digitalis Purpurea, Meloe vesicatorius, Terebinthina Veneta, Balsamum Copaiva,

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Scilla Maritima, Colchicum Autumnale, Polygala Senega, &c the peculiar symptoms which point out the use of either of these are explained with so much nicety by our greatly esteemed Professor of the Practice in his able work on Therapeutics, that the already swollen size of this Essay must apologize for my referring to his book for the most complete information on the Subject.

With a view of carrying off the water, Purgative Medicines are much employed, the drastic ones as being most stimulating are in most instances selected; in our choice however we are to be guided entirely by the circumstances of the case: the Chrystals of Tartar is the one most commonly preferred, generally however it is united with other articles

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of a more powerful description, such as Jalap, Scammony, Elaterium &c. In cases in which the viscera are sound and unimpaired the correct practice would be to employ active and stimulating purgatives to cause an evacuation of the water and then follow up very quickly the use of active Tonics, or the Tonics might even be combined with the purgatives-

Emetics sometimes produce a speedy absorption of the water.

Diaphoresis has also been employed as a means of getting rid of the effusions, it is however apt to produce much debility and very often proves inefficacious; to excite the sweat we may employ Diaphoretic Medicines or use external means.

The application of Blisters has in some instances been attended with much benefit, but considerable caution is required

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in their use as fatal Mortification has been observed to follow their employment - Frictions and Pressure by means of a Flannen Roller has also oftentimes been used with the happiest results -

The diet must be altogether regulated by the state of the case, if inflammation exists it must be low; if debility is present Articles of a nourishing and strengthening kind are to be given -

Professor Brera of Padua suggests Iodine as being in him a powerful remedy in Dropsy from the great effect it excites in the Lymphatic System, as is shown in its power of discussing Goitre &c -

The four following paragraphs constitute the three hundreth and ninety second, thirdy fifth and sixth propositions of Broussais. And as they bear directly upon the subject of

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this Thesis will I hope be deemed sufficiently interesting to merit insertion at this place.

"Dropsy produced by an obstacle of the circulation, yields to bleedings, and to light diuretics, if the obstacle is not incurable. The digitalis is useful if Hypertrophy of the heart is its cause -

Dropsy occasioned by the Sympathetic effect of a chronic Inflammation is rarely curable, because this inflammation does not produce it, till it has produced disorganization of the part where it is seated - The treatment consists of that which is suited to the inflammation, and of diuretics so administered as not to injure the Stomach -

Dropsies arising from imperfect assimilation, are removed by Tonics, by a warm dry light air, good diet and the remedies of Scurvy, if this disease exists at the same

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time with it - But those caused by the abuse of Mercury and other Mineral substances, sometimes resist on account of the gastro enteritis which accompanies them, and which has often concurred to produce them.

Dropsies which originate from hunger, hemorrhagies, and other causes of exhaustion, are curable by Tonics, good diet, wine, alcohol and active diuretics, where there is no disorganization of the Viscera; but great caution is necessary in restoring the system to strength.

When the methods spoken of have failed to dislodge the water, Punctures must be resorted to, which are to be made as small as possible and in such situations which are not depending; for when these precautions are neglected, the parts are apt to become gangrenous. Sprees

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have also been applied; the same remarks apply to them as to Punctures.

I have now concluded what I had to say on the subject of Dropsy, my remarks are more extended, than I contemplated when the Essay was first commenced; it could not however have been well compressed into a smaller space and to have lengthened it would perhaps have been unnecessary. That it is imperfect and contains nothing which is either very new or original, I am well aware, all I believe however which can be expected in works of this description, is to consult the best authorities upon the subject and give their Ideas with such occasional remarks of our own as the subject may suggest; this I have in some measure accom-

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plished and must finish with the hope that the whole production will be received with that lenity and forbearance which constitute a part of the characters of my much respected and exalted Instructors the present Professors of the University of Pennsylvania —

October. 16.th 1823 —

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